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U.S. Dealing Preceded Hostage's Death

The frustration and ultimate futility of trying to ransom American hostages with arms or money were tragically demonstrated last spring, a few days after the U.S. bombing raid on Libya. A gentle, pro-Arab librarian at the American University in Beirut was murdered when his kidnapers, tired of waiting for the \$3 million the Reagan administration was hoping to raise for his release, sold him to the Libyans, who wanted revenge for the U.S. air raid.

Peter Kilburn, 60, was abducted on Dec. 3, 1984. His body was found last April 18, three days after the U.S. bombing raid on Libya. Here's what happened during the 16½ months of private hell that Kilburn endured:

An erudite, generous man, said to have had the best collection of Verdi opera records in Beirut, Kilburn often paid for the education of needy students and bought books for them and the American University library. He had spent 20 years in Lebanon and had suffered a stroke that left him walking with a cane.

Despite his sympathy for the Arabs—or possibly because of it?—Kilburn was kidnaped by a gang of extortionists, a sort of Lebanese mob. They contacted the U.S. government and demanded \$3 million for Kilburn's return.

Last Dec. 27, we reported that Kilburn "was being held by a different group than the [pro-Iranian] captors of the other American hostages." We withheld details while negotiations for Kilburn's release continued.

Several times within the next few weeks the White House seemed close to springing Kilburn.

The National Security Council gave serious consideration to the idea of raising several million dollars privately from American humanitarian and church groups to meet the kidnapers' ransom demands for Kilburn and other hostages.

The same well-meaning groups were providing (as they do to this day) tens of thousands of dollars to keep negotiations alive through an Anglican Church envoy, Terry Waite. As a special adviser to the archbishop of Canterbury, Waite seemed to be close last winter to getting several of the hostages out.

Waite's negotiations for Kilburn broke down several times, and ended abruptly when the United States bombed Libya last April 15. Kilburn's kidnapers were already frustrated at their inability to sell their hostage for the \$3 million they wanted.

The Libyans had already offered them \$1 million for the unfortunate Kilburn two days before the U.S. raid. The kidnapers quickly closed the deal and sold their captive to Libyan agents. On April 18, Kilburn's body was found on the roadside near Beirut along with the bodies of two British hostages, who had been shot in reprisal for Britain's cooperation in the U.S. raid on Libya. According to our intelligence sources, the British hostages—and presumably Kilburn—were shot by a Libyan army officer who had come from Tripoli to do the job.

Kilburn was one victim of a tragic situation that has made every American in the Middle East a potential target for abduction and murder by pro-Iranian terrorists—or mercenary thugs under the protection of Syria.